

Rick James

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Rick James (born **James Ambrose Johnson, Jr.**; February 1, 1948 – August 6, 2004) was an American musician and composer.

Influenced by singers such as Marvin Gaye and Smokey Robinson, James started singing in doo-wop and R&B groups as a teenager in his hometown of Buffalo, New York. After entering the U.S. Navy to avoid being drafted, he deserted to Toronto, where he formed the rock and R&B band, The Mynah Birds, whose lineup once included Bruce Palmer, Neil Young, and Nick St. Nicholas. James' tenure with the group was interrupted after he was discovered recording with the group in Motown in 1966. Surrendering to military authorities, he served a one-year prison term. Upon release, James moved to California to resume his duties with the Mynah Birds, although the group eventually split. James began a series of rock bands in California and worked with Motown under the assumed name "Ricky Matthews" as a songwriter.

In 1977, he signed with the Gordy Records imprint of Motown as a recording artist, releasing his debut, *Come Get It!*, in April 1978. The album sold over two million copies and launched his career into the mainstream as a funk and soul artist. His most popular album, 1981's *Street Songs*, launched him into superstardom thanks to the hit singles, "Give It to Me Baby" and "Super Freak", the latter song becoming his signature song for the rest of his life, and the basis of MC Hammer's biggest hit, "U Can't Touch This"; James eventually sued for back royalties. After being credited as writer of the song, James became the 1990 recipient of a Best R&B Song Grammy for composing the song. Due to this success, James was often called the "king of punk funk", for his mix of funk, soul and underground-inspired rock music. In addition to his own success, James emerged as a successful songwriter and producer for other artists, such as Teena Marie, The Mary Jane Girls, The Temptations, Eddie Murphy and Smokey Robinson.

An addiction to drugs hampered his career by the late 1980s. In the 1990s, his legal troubles, which included kidnapping and torturing two women while under the

Rick James



James on *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* in 1984

Background information

Birth name	James Ambrose Johnson, Jr.
Also known as	Big Jimmy Jimmy "The Whale" Ricky James Matthews Slick Rick
Born	February 1, 1948 Buffalo, New York, U.S.
Died	August 6, 2004 (aged 56) Los Angeles, California, U.S.
Genres	R&B · soul · funk · P-funk · doo-wop · quiet storm · disco
Occupation(s)	Recording artist · songwriter · musician · dancer · bandleader · record producer
Instruments	Vocals · bass · guitar · keyboards · drums · other percussion instruments
Years active	1964–1993, 1996–1998, 2004
Labels	Gordy Records · Reprise Records · Mercury Records

influence of crack, led him to serve a three-year sentence at California's Folsom State Prison. James was released on parole in 1996 and resumed his musical career releasing the album, *Urban Rhapsody*, in 1997. A mild stroke suffered during a concert in early 1998 interrupted his career for a brief time. James received new notoriety in 2004, when he appeared (as himself) in an episode of the *Chappelle's Show*, in a Charlie Murphy "True Hollywood Stories" segment that satirized James' past wild lifestyle. James died later that year from heart failure, at age 56.

Associated acts

The Mynah Birds, Stone City Band, Heaven and Earth, Mary Jane Girls, Process and the Doo Rags, Neil Young, Val Young, Eddie Murphy, Teena Marie

Website

www.rickjames.com
(<http://www.rickjames.com>)

Notable instruments

Hohner Clavinet
Music Man StingRay
Rickenbacker 4001
Gibson Les Paul

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Biography

Early life and career

James Ambrose Johnson, Jr. was born on February 1, 1948, in Buffalo, New York, to Mabel (née Sims) and James Ambrose Johnson, Sr. He was one of eight children. James' father, an autoworker, left the family when James was ten. His mother was a dancer for Katherine Dunham, and later ran errands for a Mafia-connected mob, just to feed her family.^[1] James' mother would take him on her collecting route, and it was in bars where she worked that James got to see performers such as John Coltrane, Miles Davis, and Etta James perform.^[1] James claimed later in the autobiography, *Glow*, that he lost his virginity at "age 9 or 10" to a 14-year-old local girl, claiming his "kinky nature came in early".^[1] James eventually attended Orchard Park High School and Bennett High School prior to dropping out. James was introduced to drugs at an early age and, as a young teen, was busted for burglary.^[1] Due to his stints in jail for theft, James entered the United States Navy at 14 or 15, lying about his age, to avoid the draft. During that time, he also became a drummer for local jazz groups in New York City.^[1] Due to him missing his twice-monthly Reserve sessions at the USS *Enterprise*, he found himself ordered to Vietnam.^[1]

In 1965, he fled for Toronto, where he made friendships with then-local musicians Neil Young and Joni Mitchell.^[1] To avoid being caught by military authorities, James went under the assumed name, "Ricky James Matthews".^[1] That same year, James formed the Mynah Birds, a band that produced a fusion of soul, folk and rock music. In 1965, the band briefly recorded for the Canadian division of Columbia Records, releasing the single, "Mynah Bird Hop"/"Mynah Bird Song". At one point, Nick St. Nicholas of later Steppenwolf fame was a member; eventually bassist Bruce Palmer replaced him by the time "Mynah Bird Hop" was recorded. James and Palmer would recruit guitarists Tom Morgan and Xavier Taylor and drummer Rick Mason to form a new Mynah Birds lineup, and soon traveled to Detroit to record with Motown. Before the group began recording their first songs for the label, Morgan left, unhappy about the label's attitude towards the musicians. Neil Young eventually took his place. It was while in Detroit that James met his musical heroes, Marvin Gaye and Stevie Wonder. After meeting Wonder and telling him his name, Wonder felt the name "Ricky James Matthews" was "too long", and instead told James to shorten it to "Ricky James".^[1]

After James got involved in a fight with the group's financial backer in Toronto, the Navy was given a tip regarding James' whereabouts and the singer was soon arrested.^[1] Afterwards, Motown dropped the band from the label, and James spent a year in prison.^[1] After his release, James moved to California where he resumed his musical career. After forming a duo with musician Greg Reeves, Reeves was soon hired to work as a musician for the rock supergroup, Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young.^[1] James returned to Motown as a songwriter in 1968, under the assumed name "Rickie Matthews", and worked with acts such as The Miracles, Bobby Taylor and the Vancouvers, and The Spinners. According to James, he briefly got involved in pimp activity during this time, but stopped because he felt he wasn't qualified for it due to the harsh activity and the abuse of women there.^[1] Returning to California from Toronto in 1969, James got involved with hair stylist Jay Sebring, who agreed to invest in James' music.^[1] One night, Sebring invited

James and his girlfriend to a party hosted by Sebring's friend Sharon Tate.^[1] James claimed a "horrible hangover" forced him to cancel his visit to the house. That night, Sebring, Tate and their other guests were murdered by members of Charles Manson's family.^[1]

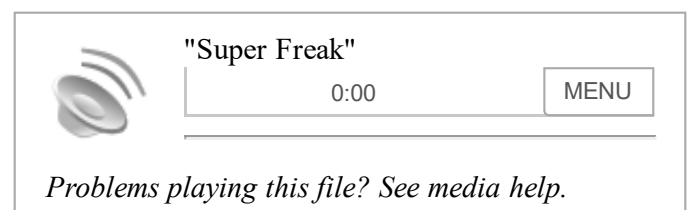
In late 1968, James formed the rock band Salt and Pepper.^[2] James and S&P member Ed Roth later were included in Bruce Palmer's solo album *The Cycle is Complete*. The duo also recorded as part of the group Heaven and Earth in Toronto. Heaven and Earth eventually changed their name to Great White Cane and recorded an album for Los Angeles label, Lion Records, in 1972, though it was later shelved. James formed another band, Hot Lips, afterwards. In 1973, James signed with A&M Records, where his first single under the name Rick James, "My Mama", was released, becoming a club hit in Europe.^[1] In 1976, James returned to Buffalo, New York, and formed the Stone City Band and recorded the song "Get Up and Dance!", which was his second single to be released. In 1977, James and the Stone City Band signed a contract with Motown's Gordy Records imprint, where they began recording their first album in New York City.

Solo career

In April 1978, James released his debut solo album, *Come Get It!*, which included the Stone City Band. The album launched the top 20 hit, "You and I", which became his first number-one R&B hit. The album also included the hit single, "Mary Jane". It eventually sold two million copies, launching James' musical career to stardom, and helping out Motown Records at a time when label fortunes had dwindled. In early 1979, James' second album, *Bustin' Out of L Seven*, followed the previous album's success, eventually selling a million copies. A third album, *Fire It Up*, was released in late 1979 going gold. Around that same period, James launched his first headlining tour, the Fire It Up Tour, and agreed to invite the then-upcoming artist, Prince, as well as singer Teena Marie, as his opening act.^[1] James had produced Marie's successful Motown debut album, *Wild and Peaceful* and was featured on the hit duet, "I'm a Sucker (For Your Love)". James was credited with naming Marie, "Lady Tee", on the song, a nickname that stuck with Marie for the rest of her career. The Fire It Up tour led to James developing a bitter rivalry with Prince, after he accused the musician for ripping off his act.^[1]

Following the end of the tour in 1980, James released the ballads-heavy *Garden of Love*, which became his fourth gold record. In 1981, James recorded his best-selling album to date, *Street Songs*, which like his previous four albums, was a concept album. *Street Songs* featured a fusion mix of different genres, including rock and new wave, as well as James' brand of crossover funk, enabling James' own style of "punk funk". The album featured hit singles such as "Ghetto Life", the Teena Marie duet "Fire and Desire", "Give It to Me Baby", and his biggest crossover hit to date, "Super Freak", which peaked at number sixteen on the Billboard Hot 100, and sold over a million copies. *Street Songs* peaked at number one R&B and number three pop, and sold over three million copies alone in the United States. Following up that success, James released two more gold albums, 1982's *Throwin' Down* and 1983's *Cold Blooded*.

During this period, envious of Prince's success as producer of other acts including The Time and Vanity 6, James launched the acts Process and the Doo-Rags, and the Mary Jane Girls, featuring his former background singer Joanne "JoJo" McDuffie as the lead vocalist and background performer, finding success with the latter group, due to the hits, "All Night Long", "Candy Man", and "In My House". In 1982, James produced the Temptations' top 10 R&B hit, "Standing on the Top". In 1983, James recorded the hit duet,



"Ebony Eyes", with singer Smokey Robinson. In 1985, James produced another hit for entertainer Eddie Murphy with the song "Party All The Time". That same year he appeared on an episode of *The A-Team* with Isaac Hayes. After the release of his ninth solo album, *The Flag*, in 1986, James signed with Warner Bros. Records, which released the album *Wonderful* in 1988, featuring the hit, "Loosey's Rap".

James' controversial and provocative image became troublesome sometimes. During his heyday, James had presented his songs to the then-fledgling music video channel, MTV, only to be turned down because James' music didn't fit the network's rock playlist. James accused the network of racism.^[3] When MTV and BET both avoided playing the video for "Loosey's Rap" because of its graphic sexual content, James considered the networks hypocritical in light of them still playing provocative videos by Madonna and Cher.

In 1989, James' eleventh album, *Kickin'*, was issued only in the UK. By 1990, he had lost his deal with Warner Bros. and James began struggling with personal and legal problems. That year MC Hammer released his hit signature song, "U Can't Touch This", which sampled the prominent opening riff from "Super Freak". James and his co-writer on "Super Freak", Alonzo Miller, successfully sued Hammer for shared songwriting credit and all three consequently received the 1990 Grammy Award for Best R&B Song.^[4] In 1997, James released *Urban Rhapsody*, his first album since his release from prison on assault charges, and he toured to promote the album. That same year, he discussed his life and career in interviews for the VH1 musical documentary series, *Behind the Music*, which aired in early 1998. James' musical career slowed again after he suffered a minor stroke during a concert. In 1999, James accepted an offer by Eddie Murphy himself to appear in his film, *Life*.^[5]

Personal life

Relationships and children

James had three children. With Syville Morgan, a former singer and songwriter, he had daughter Ty and son Rick, Jr.

In 1989, James met 17-year-old partygoer Tanya Hijazi. The two began a romance in 1990. In 1993, the couple welcomed the arrival of their only child and James' youngest, Tazman. Following their releases from prison for assaulting Mary Sauger and Frances Alley, the couple married in 1996 and divorced in 2002.

James was very close with Teena Marie, whom he met and began collaborating with in 1979. While James had denied that the two were romantically involved, Teena Marie stated they were romantically involved and engaged "for two weeks". Their professional partnership lasted into 2004, when Marie released her comeback album, *La Dona*, which included her and James' duet "I Got You". When James died, Teena Marie said she struggled to come to terms with his death.

Notable friendships

James became close friends with Eddie Murphy after the two met in 1981. Following his exit from the United States Navy in 1984, Murphy's older brother Charlie Murphy, whose first post-Navy job was working as security for his famous brother, began hanging out with James, and he bonded with the singer. Murphy would later recall on *Chappelle's Show* his sometimes strained relationship with James, which

helped to revive James' name in the public eye after years of seclusion, following his mild stroke in 1998. James also appeared in the episode recounting his memory of the experiences shared by Charlie, such as starting impromptu fights with him and staining Eddie Murphy's couch with mud.

James was also a friend of fellow Motown acts Smokey Robinson and Marvin Gaye, one of the singers James idolized as a teenager. Additionally, he befriended Gaye's second wife, Janis, and he was godfather of Gaye's daughter Nona. James' relationship with Robinson began shortly after James signed with Motown and, in 1983, the duo recorded the hit "Ebony Eyes."

James also idolized former Temptations lead singer David Ruffin and Ruffin's self-proclaimed uncle, bass vocalist Melvin Franklin, and grabbed at the chance to produce the hit "Standing on the Top" for them in 1982. Before that, the then-current lineup of the group recorded background vocals on two James-associated projects – James' *Street Songs* (singing "Ghetto Life" and "Super Freak") and Teena Marie's *It Must Be Magic* (singing on the title track). In "Super Freak," "It Must Be Magic," and "Standing on the Top," James famously shouted out, "Temptations SING!"

Drug abuse and health problems

James' lifelong drug abuse began in his teens, first with marijuana and heroin.^[1] James began using cocaine in the late 1960s. His cocaine use became an addiction by the 1980s, and he began freebasing by the end of the decade. James recalled smoking crack cocaine in his Beverly Hills mansion and often had aluminum foil on the windows to escape onlookers.

His drug use led to health issues that impacted his life. In April 1984, he was hospitalized after being found unconscious in the middle of his house by a friend.^[6] James claimed he quit cocaine when he entered prison, although cocaine would later be found in his bloodstream following his autopsy.

Legal problems

The start of the 1990s brought with it a string of bizarre and sometimes horrific incidents for James. His drug use was by this time public knowledge. He was mainly addicted to cocaine and later admitted to spending about US\$7,000 per week on drugs for five years straight. In 1993, he and future wife Tanya Hijazi were accused of holding 24-year-old Frances Alley hostage for up to six days although accounts vary on how long she was actually held, tying her up, forcing her to perform sexual acts, and burning her legs and abdomen with the hot end of a crack cocaine pipe, during a week-long cocaine binge. In 1993, while out on bail for that earlier incident, James, under the influence of cocaine, assaulted music executive Mary Sauger at the St. James Club and Hotel in West Hollywood. Sauger claims she met James and Hijazi for a business meeting, but said the two then kidnapped and beat her over a 20-hour period.

He was found guilty of both offenses but was cleared of a torture charge in the crack pipe incident that could have put him in prison for the rest of his life. He served two years in Folsom Prison and lost US\$2 million in a civil suit to one of the women. He was released in 1996.^[7] In 1998, James was accused of sexually assaulting a 26-year-old woman, though charges were later dropped.

Final years

Chappelle's Show

In early 2004, James participated in a comedy sketch on *Chappelle's Show*, in a segment called "Charlie Murphy's True Hollywood Stories". James and Murphy recounted humorous stories of their experiences together during the early 1980s. During the sketch, James' character, played by Dave Chappelle, utters the now famous catchphrase, "I'm Rick James, bitch!" The sketches were punctuated by James, as himself, explaining his past behavior with the phrase, "Cocaine is a hell of a drug!"

Autobiography and final music projects

Autobiography

At the time of his death, James was working on an autobiography, *The Confessions of Rick James: Memoirs of a Super Freak*, as well as a new album. The book was finally published toward the end of 2007 by Colossus Books and features a picture of his tombstone.

David Ritz, who had been employed by James to work on the book with him, later said that this version did not truly reflect how the musician wanted it published. In 2014, Ritz published his own, re-edited version, *Glow: The Autobiography of Rick James*.

Final music projects

He was also supporting Teena Marie's tour of her album *La Doña* and toured with her in May 2004, playing with her at the KBLX Stone Soul Picnic, Pioneer Amphitheatre, Hayward, California.^[8]

Death

On the morning of August 6, 2004, James' caretaker found him dead in James' Los Angeles home at the Oakwood Toluca Hills apartment complex, just outside Burbank. He had died from pulmonary failure and cardiac failure, associated with his various health conditions of diabetes, and a stroke, pacemaker, and heart attack. His autopsy found alprazolam, diazepam, bupropion, citalopram, hydrocodone, digoxin, chlorpheniramine, methamphetamine, and cocaine in his blood.^[9] However, the coroner stated that "none of the drugs or drug combinations were found to be at levels that were life-threatening in and of themselves".^[9]

James was buried at Forest Lawn Cemetery in Buffalo, New York. His two-ton, jet black headstone is engraved with the following lyrics to an unreleased song: "I've had it all, I've done it all, I've seen it all. It's all about love – God is love."^[10]

Digital releases

Rick's entire Motown Records back catalogue was released in 2014 on iTunes for the very first time in digitally remastered form. This marks the first time many of his albums have been widely available since their initial release. Many Rick James CD's, namely *Fire It Up*, *Garden Of Love* and *The Flag*, have become very rare and highly sought after for fans.

Discography

Studio albums

- *Come Get It!* (with the Stone City Band) (1978)
- *Bustin' Out of L Seven* (1979)
- *Fire It Up* (1979)
- *Garden of Love* (1980)
- *Street Songs* (1981)
- *Throwin' Down* (1982)
- *Cold Blooded* (1983)
- *Glow* (1985)
- *The Flag* (1986)
- *Wonderful* (1988)
- *Kickin'* (1989)
- *Urban Rhapsody* (1997)
- *Deeper Still* (2007)

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- James, Rick (2014). *Glow: The Autobiography of Rick James*. Atria Books. ISBN 978-1-4767-6416-0.

External links

- Official website (<http://www.rickjames.com>)
- Rick James, The Mynah Birds and Neil Young (<http://www.thrasherswheat.org/friends/rick-james.htm>)
- Rise & Fall of a Super Freak (<http://longform.org/stories/rise-and-fall-of-a-super-freak>)
- Rick James (<http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0416872/>) at the Internet Movie Database
- Rick James (<http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=9276693>) at *Find a Grave*

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